Moral Distance: Introduction

This issue of *The Monist* is devoted to the question of how we should gauge the moral significance of distance. "Moral distance," by analogy with "aesthetic distance," may signify degrees of moral indifference, but that is not the theme we are concerned with here. The problem of distance in morality is not the same as that of moral indifference; it is about boundaries.

Boundaries demarcate not only physical, political, and other space but the moral space of inclusion and exclusion determining the limit and extent of our moral concern. One important issue debated among ethicists is the relevance of distance in determining moral boundaries. It may seem intuitively obvious that distance, both physical and relational, makes a significant difference in our obligations to help others. Intuition seems to tell us that we should help someone in need nearby, all else being the same, over someone similarly situated in a far-away place. Likewise, it may seem intuitively correct to hold that we have a greater obligation to help those with whom we have relational or affective ties than to help strangers. Distance seems to set moral boundaries, and distant strangers are accorded minimal moral concern.

Ethical traditions that base morality on human nature claim that distance over time and place matters morally because humans are by nature unsuited to show equal concern to distant people and events compared to those near in time and place. Aristotle observed that "disasters that have just happened or are soon to happen excite more pity [than those in the distant past or future]." (*Rhetoric*, 1386a; see also *Rhetoric*, 1388a10.) Later Hume famously stated: "The breaking of a mirror gives us more concern when at home, than the burning of a house, when abroad, and some hundred leagues distant." (*Treatise*, 2.3.7.) In contrast, Peter Singer, who initiated the contemporary discussion of moral distance and moral boundaries in his essay "Famine, Affluence and Morality" (1972), argues that the interests of strangers, near or far, should count as much as those of friends and neighbors.

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But if distance is irrelevant, does this not make morality excessively demanding and excessively impersonal? If, on the other hand, moral obligation does indeed vary with distance, might this not imply a callous indifference to many in need? These questions are the main thrust of the essays that follow. The authors also examine such issues as whether temporal and cultural distance raises moral concerns similar to those raised by physical and relational distance.

Jeremy Waldron uses the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan to explore the issues of the moral problem of distance. Though this parable relies on the proximity of two human beings and immediacy of claims of need that might not seem helpful in offering us a clue to the question of whether moral concerns diminish over distance, Waldron finds that it offers a good beginning. The parable evokes the intuition that the sheer proximity of two human beings, even in the absence of any ethnic or other affiliations, generates moral obligation. Waldron suggests that the impartial and universal moral message of the parable can be useful for morality in today's global world where we encounter strangers every day.

Wendy Hamblet uses the theme of humanity and proximity, following the phenomenological accounts of Emmanuel Levinas and the literary ideas of Dostoevsky, to highlight the moral problem of distance. Contrary to the intuition evoked by the Good Samaritan parable, Ivan Karamazov (in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*) maintains that nearness frustrates compassion because the abject presence of the needy renders impossible a sense of identification needed for eliciting moral concern. Levinas, on the other hand, believes that moral concern can be elicited only when, in the immediate presence of the needy, a powerful rupture of our given sense of identity takes place. This rupture gives birth to conscience, which makes us morally awake. However, Hamblet points out that Levinas's account of moral obligation is problematic in the bigger world where the needy members of humanity live far away from the affluent and the powerful. But Hamblet finds a resolution to this problem of distance in Dostoevsky. Ivan Karamazov says that children have a special moral claim upon us because they are innocent and beautiful, regardless of where they live. It is easy to identify with their need, so Hamblet suggests that we should begin our moral response to humanity at large with the children of the world.

Apparently Hamblet can extend Levinas's account of moral conscience in the proximity of another human being—which roughly echoes the message of the parable of the Good Samaritan—along the line that Waldron seems to suggest with regard to today's global world. As spheres of interaction constantly expand, modern technology makes it easy to reach the distant needy and brings their plight home. The globalization process makes the local encounter the global, and we understand that we share the same space. Unlike biblical times, the distant is not distant anymore, so the message of the parable may have a new relevance today in evoking a sense of moral duty toward the global needy.

The moral problem of distance, to a large extent, is the problem of finding a resolution between the impartialists who claim that distance *per se* doesn't make a moral difference and the partialists who favor morally defensible partiality with regard to proximity and special ties. The moral implications of a human encounter, as discussed by the two essays mentioned above, raise key issues in this debate. The next several essays take the debate in various directions.

Soran Reader claims that an encounter is a moral relationship, so it obligates. Even a chance meeting with a stranger is a relationship, Reader claims, if it contains "real connection." She defends partiality to those with whom we enter into a relationship by outlining a much broader relationship-based account of moral obligation than what the other partialists offer. This way Reader thinks she can capture the intuitions behind both the partialists and the impartialists, which she hopes would offer a meaningful resolution to the moral problem of distance.

Richard Arneson pursues a different angle in trying to reduce the tension between the impartialist demands and common-sense morality, which favors partiality with regard to special ties such as friendship and love. His act-consequentialist moral theory denies partiality but leaves room for special ties. He believes that if special ties could be shown to be of moral value, then they should be promoted impartially. He claims that if our culture were more receptive to consequentialism, which does not favor oneself and one's special ties over others and their special ties, then we would have had an easier time in reconciling consequentialist moral demands with the common-sense morality of special ties, minus its emphasis on partiality.

Like Arneson, Garrett Cullity believes that distance *per se* is morally irrelevant. However, unlike Arneson, he believes that a consequentialist approach to the morality of aid makes morally excessive demands, but not because of its stance on the moral irrelevance of remoteness. In fact, Cullity believes that if moral obligation were to diminish with distance, this would lead to moral callousness. Rather, Cullity thinks that severe demands for aid to distant strangers are subject to the criticism of depriving people of life-enhancing goods, based on self-concern and special attachments to others. He believes that these reasons can be construed from an impartial point of view, leading to the rejection of the severe demands made by the consequentialists. So, unlike Arneson, Cullity finds that partiality can be impartially acceptable. However, he claims, it would still show that one is not giving inadequate (though perhaps less) considerations to other people's interests.

Jan Narveson, too, takes distance *per se* to be morally irrelevant, but he defends a view of beneficence that is undemanding. We do not have any duty to help, only an obligation not to cause harm to others, either to compatriots or foreigners. By contrast, Kok-Chor Tan tries to strike a balance between our duties towards compatriots and our obligation of global justice. He shows that global justice trumps over the demands of compatriots, but patriotic ties are also of value and shouldn't be rejected *per se*. Just as Arneson claims that special ties are subject to prior moral constraints, Tan asserts that patriotic ties are limited by impartial demands of global justice. However, unlike Arneson's act-consequentialism, Tan leaves room for special-ties partiality, but only within the regulative principle of global justice.

Hume is well known for his ethics of partiality because he would say that impartial duty of beneficence to distant strangers is contrary to human nature. Yet Catherine Wilson tries to construct a "Humean" argument for our obligation to aid the distant needy based on a reconstruction of three principles that Hume states in his *Treatise*. Wilson aims to show that obligation to distant strangers need not be contrary to human nature as Hume sees it, and that one needn't construe an utilitarian argument, as do Singer and Arneson, to justify such obligation. Regarding the latter claim, rights-based cosmopolitans would readily agree with Wilson.

The next two essays address the topic of the moral significance of temporal and cultural distance. Should norms and beliefs of distant times

and cultures be judged by the standards of our time and our culture? Nicholas Rescher says no, because he believes that to do so is morally inappropriate based on our own ideas of reasonableness, fairness, and justice. The morally right thing to do is to judge remote peoples by the standards of *their* time and culture. Rescher points out that this is not necessarily relativism, at least not in the negative sense of rational and moral indifference. Standards of rationality and justice, as we construe them, demand that we do not judge the past by our own standards.

Stephen Gardiner raises important ethical considerations in regard to the distant future. He identifies a core problem of temporal moral distance, and argues that this problem is the main concern of distinctively intergenerational ethics. At the heart of the problem is the idea that each generation is in a causally asymmetrical position with respect to its successors, and this creates problems of unfairness when temporally-diffuse goods are at stake. Gardiner argues that this problem is manifest in more or less degenerate forms in the real world, and that its relevance is not overshadowed by the presence of other future-oriented difficulties.

In the last essay, Karen Green examines Peter Singer's utilitarianism. She believes that the universalizability requirement of Singer's position can be made compatible with partiality only if partiality is limited and justified by impartiality. However, she shows that this procedure may put to question some of Singer's utilitarian principles. Green believes that Singer is mistaken in directing his argument to each of us individually. Instead of this aggregate of individual responsibilities which generates excessively demanding moral obligation, she asserts that a system of "divided responsibility" should be developed in an institutional setting. Green says this would allow us to pursue a range of partialist projects, within limits, yet would respond more effectively to the alleviation of global poverty.

As the essays cover a wide range of pertinent topics regarding the moral problem of distance, they shed light on the very scope of morality. They also bring into focus the important methodological issues in ethics such as the moral status of intuition and the competing claims of rival moral theories. While probing such enduring moral issues as morality and human nature, partiality versus impartiality, moral responsibility and individual choice, moral and cultural relativism, and justice and human rights, the authors use the current debate to challenge and defend assumptions

about such central moral concepts as friendship, patriotism, and virtue. They also provide a context for public discourse on institutional policy matters. In today's global world, the moral problem of distance is especially challenging. These essays not only respond to the moral challenges of globalization but to the question of intergenerational justice.

Deen K. Chatterjee

University of Utah